



Discussion Questions

for

The Mountain School

by Greg Alder

1. If judged through most news stories, we get the impression that Africa is two things: a romantic land of wild animals, and a desperate place of war and poverty. What is the Africa you experience through *The Mountain School*?
2. Alder predicts early on that his proficiency in the local language, Sesotho, will determine his enjoyment of life in Tsoeneng. So he dedicates himself to learning it, despite having only a single, old grammar book. Was it nevertheless worth his time and effort? Is learning the local language the duty of migrants?
3. Learning to live a simple, rural Basotho life proves very satisfying to Alder, and yet many Basotho want a more urban, Western life. Is this just a “grass is always greener” scenario? Or is it something else?
4. Alder thinks of Tsoeneng and America as being so different that they feel like separate, parallel worlds. Why? Does this make you suspect that globalization is not as far-reaching as some would have us believe?
5. Recall the kidnapping of Motsilisi. Do you agree with Alder’s approach of not wanting to impose on the runnings of the local culture? When should one intervene while living in a new place?
6. Throughout *The Mountain School* we see changes in the village, school, and people: the road is paved the year Alder arrives; the school puts up a fence and a new hostel building the year after that; most teachers have cell phones by 2006. What developments do you think might have occurred since then?
7. The development projects of Americans and other foreigners in Lesotho are sometimes misguided. How? Can outsiders help Basotho?
8. Tholang and Makhala do household chores for “Sir Greg,” as Basotho youth are taught to always serve their elders. Is it different in your family or community? Is that good or bad?
9. In the end, Alder has a feeling of belonging and not belonging at the same time. Why doesn’t he totally belong? Do you think an outsider could ever fully fit into this place?
10. Also in the final section of the book, Alder says that he at last feels a certain maturity, like he has passed through a second youth in Lesotho. How do you think this might affect him upon his return to America? Will any of his new skills translate to life there?
11. What does the title of the book, *The Mountain School*, refer to?
12. What do you think Alder’s goals were in writing this book? Is there a main message he’d like the reader to take from it?